

Corporate SEO Preparation

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Understanding the value of global communications, nearly every organized organization in the world has a website. From grassroot community groups to major corporations, the World Wide Web has expanded by billions of websites over the past half decade. Because the medium is easy, cheap and absurdly flexible, it has become the backbone of a "people's global communications network".

Seven years ago most corporate CEOs saw the Web as a secondary communications device, a brochure rack of sorts. The brick and mortar sector was wary of the over-hype but wise enough to pay some attention regardless. Five years ago, the glass-sky fell in the dot-com crash of 2K. Since then however, the web's amazing usability has interwoven itself throughout our social and business networks. In today's tech-driven information society, the web participates in almost every aspect of the product cycle for virtually every product from crop-seed to aircraft.

Large companies are just now starting to recognize the wisdom behind a full spectrum approach to search engine marketing and the marching orders seem to have gone out to the marketing divisions. There has been a notable increase in both SEO/SEM outsourcing and in-house hiring of search marketers over the past few months. Before embarking on a major search marketing campaign, large companies should consider a number of options, obligations and potential obstacles. Once you know you want to embark on an SEO campaign, you should know you will need to budget sufficient resources to support it.

Like any other corporate endeavor, a search marketing campaign involves a high degree of cooperation and communication between different divisions ranging from the boardroom to marketing to IT to the mailroom. The marketing department and the wholesale purchasing department in a retail-based business might both take a great interest in the shopping cart section of the corporate website, which is the traditional domain of the IT department. What are the chances that anyone in any of these departments specializes in the relatively new field of search engine marketing?

March like ducks...

Ensuring everyone shares an understanding of their roles and responsibilities in regards to the website is an essential first step. Many corporate websites are now designed to provide a direct conduit to consumers as opposed to acting as a simple brochure site. Examples include the travel sector, large retailers, home electronics and the home entertainment industry. In the past five years, each of these sectors has transitioned from typical brochure websites to direct-to-consumer information/sales sites, and businesses in each of these sectors rely on a number of different people performing different tasks in the organization. This is why many firms are starting to hire a seo consultant or bring on an in-house specialist. Internal education is the key to turning your SEO from a harried cat-herder into a mellow mother-duck.

Listen to your genius...

As the separate but similar fields of SEO and SEM are both becoming more complicated, good practitioners need good support networks. Many SEOs working for large organizations spend most of their time teaching sales, marketing, finance and legal departments about SEO. Sales and marketing

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personnel need to learn how to write search engine friendly content. Finance needs to understand the intricacies of bid-per-click systems and the necessity to make funds available.

After hiring an SEO consultant, it is important to actually listen to the genius you've hired. As a moderator in a SEO web forum geared for techies, I read about a number of experiences from both in-house and contracted SEO and SEM practitioners who just can't seem to get the various departments to listen to them.

One brilliant SEO who was hired by a large east-coast firm lamented that work she performed one week would be consistently written over the next. She would complain about it to her boss (who managed the IT division), but the problem persisted for months until something was done. Not only was this demoralizing for the SEO, it obviously prevented the site from achieving as many strong rankings as it could have if the over-writes had not been made. As it turned out, someone in the marketing department was updating based on information from the wholesale purchasing manager and it wasn't dealt with until a new corporate policy was devised and debated, months into what should have been a strong SEO campaign. What the marketing and purchasing departments failed to grasp is unlike an easily changeable paid search advertising campaign like Overture or AdWords, getting strong organic (free) listings requires patience. Strong communication between the SEO and all divisions responsible for onsite content is also required.

Understand your audience

After ascertaining a corporate order and work-plan for the SEO campaign, the first thing a good SEO will want to do is figure out what he or she is marketing and who it is being marketing to. This stage involves a great deal of research into products, their uses and what consumers have to say about them. Quite often we find the words or terms used by the companies we serve are somewhat different from the words or terms used by their customers. Keyword selection is one of the most important phases of an optimization campaign. Your SEO will likely want input from every division involved in a product or service. When working for a very large company, a good SEO is interested in how manufacturers, vendors, consumers and competitors describe products. Large campaigns can involve days of tedious keyword research to hone in on the most beneficial keywords to target. Large firms should be prepared to offer their SEO support for this research. The IT department for instance should provide server-logs to the SEO. The marketing department should supply as much sales materials as possible. Other departments or divisions should be canvassed for their ideas on product descriptions as well. Chances are, everyone in the organization will share many terms but also have task-specific terms for products or their components.

Allow for change

Organic SEO relies on titles, text, links and spider-accessibility. Changes to a corporate website often necessitate several meetings to work out messaging, presentation and design. To achieve strong rankings in the organic listings, the changes recommended by your SEO are almost certainly vital; otherwise the SEO would not have suggested them. Large organizations can prepare for these changes by budgeting staff time in advance. Your SEO will want to affect a number of issues ranging from on-site factors such as site structure to off-site factors such as link building.

Give the SEO time to perform

Time expectations can be frustrating for SEOs when working with corporate organizations. While paid-advertising can offer a virtually instant road to the front page of a search engine, organic results take weeks or even months to achieve. These results can only come after the SEO has had time to perform his or her initial optimization work on the site and has seen site modifications uploaded to the server.

Once the original optimization work is uploaded, it might take up to three months to see a Top10 placement. For very large sites, chances are the SEO will do their hardest initial work on the index page and the main pages of each section in the site while giving the internal pages a light SEO update. After their first pass at the site is complete and they are satisfied a spider will be able to move from one end to the other without obstruction, they will upload the modifications to the host-server. They will then start to concentrate on the internal pages individually, a process that doesn't actually have an end point but becomes a constant task for the SEO. After a few months, the SEO will take a second pass at the initial work to fine-tune the optimization as much as possible in order to achieve or shore-up Top10 placements. The important things to realize are that a) it takes time and b) it is an ongoing process that requires regular monitoring and maintenance.

A measure of success

The last basic element a large organization needs to have in place before embarking on an SEO campaign is a way to measure the success of that campaign. There are some in the SEO/SEM industry who insist the only measurement is return on investment. There are others who believe that a measurable increase in traffic (regardless of sales) is the best measure. There is a third stream of thought that says that site placement is the goal and that is the ultimate measure of success. From the point of view of a corporate marketer, each of the three measurements has validity and each has limitations.

Return on investment is probably the most important but least practical of the measurements. Research from within and from outside the SEM industry shows that search marketing is more about branding and recognition than it is about direct sales. Like a television commercial or magazine advertisement, consumers see search results as a form of advertising. It is very difficult to determine the ultimate factors that push a consumer to decide to make a purchase but we do know that availability and familiarity are the two most important factors on the web.

An increase in site traffic is another way to measure the success of a campaign. This is probably the best of the three as it is affected most by the SEO's choice of titles and descriptive text. Sites with Top10 placement can expect to see a dramatic increase in site visitors. If the SEO writes attractive titles and strong text, and those titles and text appear on a search engine results page, chances are that title and descriptive text helped push the visitor to the site. Site traffic is a good long-term measurement of success for an SEO campaign.

The best measure of short-term success is actual site placements. An SEO is hired to achieve the strongest organic placements possible. SEOs are not in charge of making sales or designing the best possible product to sell to the public. The actual audience for SEOs is a small number of electronic search spiders. Good SEOs can get your site in the Top10 if given sufficient support and resources. That's what they were hired for and that's how they would like to be measured in the short-term. In the long run though, most SEOs would agree that their real goal is to increase site traffic by making the site appear more often under an increasing number of keywords.